

Giving Kids Some Autonomy Has Surprising Results

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Credit...

Jarod Lew for The New York Times

By [Jenny Anderson](#) and Rebecca Winthrop

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In a polarized nation, one point of agreement deserves more attention: Young adults say they feel woefully unprepared for life in the work force, and employers say they’re right.

In [a survey](#) by Gallup and the Walton Family Foundation of more than 4,000 members of Gen Z, 49 percent of respondents said they did not feel prepared for the future. Employers complain that young hires lack initiative, communication skills, problem-solving abilities and resilience.

There’s a reason the system isn’t serving people well, and it goes beyond the usual culprits of social media and Covid. Many recent graduates aren’t able to set targets, take initiative, figure things out and deal with setbacks — because in school and at home they were too rarely afforded any agency.

Giving kids agency doesn’t mean letting them do whatever they want. It doesn’t mean lowering expectations, turning education into entertainment or allowing children to choose their own adventure. It means requiring them to identify and pursue some of their own goals, helping them build strategies to reach those goals, assessing their progress and guiding them to course-correct when they fall short.

This approach works because it teaches kids strategies they’ll need to succeed in work and life — and keeps them invested, too. But a survey of over 66,000 young people that we conducted with the Brookings Institution and the education nonprofit Transcend showed that very few middle and high school students regularly have the opportunity to work this way. Only 33 percent of 10th graders report that they get to develop their own ideas in school. The result? In third grade, 74 percent of kids say they love school. By 10th grade, it’s 26 percent. School feels like prison, many teenagers told us over three years of research. The more time they spend in school, the less they feel like the author of their own lives, so why even try?

Johnmarshall Reeve, a professor at Australian Catholic University, has spent two decades studying what happens when kids are given some agency in school. In 35 randomized control trials in 18 countries, he and other researchers found that when students are allowed some opportunity to take their own initiative, they are more engaged in class and better able to master new skills, they have better grades and fewer problems with peers — and they are happier, too. The effect sizes were often between 0.7 and 0.9, a significant degree of impact.

Importantly, the teachers did not need to change the curriculum they taught or alter their disciplinary approach. They just applied a few new teaching practices in the course of their normal lesson. At the start of a lesson, instead of providing a step-by-step schedule and overview for the class period, as many good teachers do, they inquired about the kids’ own interest. They might say, “Today I’m going to tell you about the solar system. Before we start, is there anything about the solar system that you are particularly curious about or have a question about?” This

simple step encourages kids to think about what they know, what they care about and what they want to know more about, rather than just settling in and tuning out.

How teachers talk to their students can be as important as what they say. Mr. Reeve showed teachers how to use a reasoning tone (For example: “I’m assigning this article because I want you to understand how photosynthesis can be useful in trying to invent new climate change technology”) rather than controlling (“You have to read this article by Friday”). Students felt more respected and more interested, and they listened more. Controlling language shuts students down. “They’ll put up a shield and block you out,” Mr. Reeve told us. Reasoning language lowers the shield. Kids open up.

So: Instead of “Here is an example of a good essay. Please go write one,” the teacher might say, “Here is an example of a good essay. What is your goal for this first draft?” Rather than simply being told, students reflect on what they need to accomplish and develop a plan to make it happen. Teachers monitor and coach them along the way.

This is how agency is built. No adult can force a student to be self-driven. Children develop the skill the way they learn anything else: with practice. The act of setting the goal makes it more meaningful. When we visited Carmen Arellano, a teacher at Arthur Kramer Elementary School in Dallas, she had students set learning goals for every class she taught, and when they met them, “they chase me down in the hallway to tell me,” she said. “I think it just really makes them proud of what they’ve accomplished.”

It works at home, too. John Hattie, a laureate professor at Melbourne University, [examined almost 2,000 studies](#), covering over two million children, to understand the effect of parents’ involvement in their children’s education. When parents allowed their kids less agency, using “do this now” language and monitoring their progress closely, they did not learn as well. Parents whose children struggle with attention or learning differences are likely to need to be more hands-on in homework support, but they should still use Mr. Reeve’s principles. They can try “I hear you saying you hate doing homework. I felt that way too when I was a kid” (perspective-taking, empathy). “But homework can make a big difference in helping you master a new skill” (explanatory rationale). “We could work for 15 minutes and then take a break, or would you rather take a break now and start in an hour?” (choice and practice-planning).

As the developmental psychologist Aliza Pressman says: “Let kids do for themselves what they can already do. And guide and encourage them to do things they can almost do. And then teach and model for them the things that they can’t do.” This is how parents can help their children build agency.

We don’t have much to lose by trying. The latest edition of what’s sometimes referred to as [the nation’s report card](#) showed significant declines from already low scores in English and math. Equally concerning, children are missing an alarming amount of school. Chronic absenteeism is not just bad for kids; it is bad for society. Learning is first and foremost a social endeavor, and kids learn to be part of a cohesive community by going to one every day.

The good news is that [some promising approaches](#) are already being pursued. Agency is a big part of the model that the education nonprofit Big Picture Learning has set up at 142 public and charter schools across the country. Students at those schools regularly reflect on what topic they want to explore, identify an organization where they can learn about it and then spend up to two days a week in internships learning by doing, not just sitting and absorbing. Teachers debrief students weekly on the strategies they are using to meet their goals and provide guidance when they get stuck.

The results appear to be significant: decreases in dropout rates and increases in student engagement, higher rates of college acceptance. Plus, kids get inspired about their potential future selves. As for the kids who don't go directly on to college, many end up working in a field they were able to explore in school.

A program like that requires meaningful changes. But even little adjustments, like teachers and parents soliciting students' curiosity rather than just telling them what to do, can make a big difference.

Maybe it's time to define a higher ideal for education, less about ranking and sorting students on narrow measures of achievement and more about helping young people figure out how to unlock their potential and how to operate in the world. Amid the drumbeat of evolving artificial intelligence, wars, rising authoritarianism, political polarization and digital disconnection, they need to learn a lot more than how to follow instructions.

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